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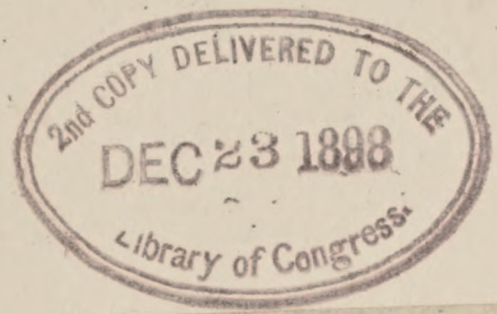

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THE WIND FLOWER

William Rose

1898

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THE WIND-FLOWER.

CHAPTER I.

THERE came a warm April day, and, cheered by the sunlight, the wind-flower opened one petal after another. She looked very delicate, slender, and frail, but she had a wonderfully pretty and pleasant little face.

She saw the blue sky overhead, the green leaves, the bees, the butterflies, and the other flowers of the forest. She saw near her, too, a big spider who had woven a wonderful web; but she was not frightened; for being very gentle, she did not suspect evil in others. As she swayed lightly to and fro in the breeze, she was filled with all the delight and exultation of youth.

"How bright the world is," she ex-

claimed: "and I have four whole days in which to live; four days, with their treasures of hours, minutes, and seconds. Let me not fail to enjoy them to the utmost, and perhaps it may be that even such a small thing as I am can do something in the world."

The sun shone merrily, and the wind-flower looked out with delighted wonder at so many new and beautiful things.

A tall sweet-william, who stood near, and who seemed proud, not being very sociable with the other flowers, smiled at her condescendingly, and gave her some wise advice on the proper way to conduct herself so as to please the inhabitants of the forest.

A great bumble-bee alighted on a twig near by, and told her stories of his travels in foreign lands. He related some things sufficiently improbable, but she in her simplicity believed and was delighted with everything he said. She listened with pleased surprise as he talked of humming

away over mountain, meadow, and forest, but she did not repine because she could not have wings and fly away like the bee.

After some hours a child came into the wood, and threw himself down on the grass close to the wind-flower. "I cannot go on the journey," he said, in a storm of anger and grief, "and I'll not be bought off. I'll have nothing to do with the new top and kite they have got for me."

When the wind-flower heard this, she trembled, for she thought: "Now is my time to do some good; and yet I am so timid, weak, and small." But yet the wind-flower was not ignorant and knew many things; for the flowers of the forest, not having time to learn slowly, are given knowledge of many kinds, and perceive many things of which our grosser senses fail to take note.

She became pink with a blush, but gained courage to speak. The boy did not at first take notice; but it was such a perfect little voice that presently he listened.

"Why should you give up your top and kite because you cannot go on a journey?" she said. "It were better to try to make up for the loss of the journey. Think how charmingly the top will hum and go to sleep, and how you can fly your kite to the clouds, sending up to it now and then messages on bits of stiff paper. Besides, to miss this journey will only make you enjoy the next one so much the more. I have no top or kite, but I live in the pleasant green wood and have four days to live. It seems to me a long life. I am going to enjoy it, and am going to do some good in it, if I can."

The boy listened, his brow was smoothed, and, going home, he had a merry day with his top and kite, and no longer repined after the journey. He grew into manhood, and acted well his part; for he thought of the wind-flower, and knew the value of time. Whenever duty called, he was not found wanting; and he enjoyed life, too, each day as it came, not looking forward

too much to some misty fairyland in the future which might never be reached ; but he kept from riot and excess, making pleasure a relaxation from work, and toiling that he might have a healthy desire for pleasure ; and he was not afraid of pain.

Finally, there came a day when his country was invaded. After a long day's battle the enemy was pushed back, but the white-haired general was taken wounded from the field. The blood was staunched, and the old soldier asked : "How long will life last ?" "You are mortally wounded," replied the surgeon, "and four days are probably all that remain to you." The sick man's children gathered anxiously around his bed ; but, to the surprise of all, he smiled, as if the words had brought to him some pleasing memory. "It is a long life," he said in a low voice. "I have been for many years living as if there might only remain to me four days. I am going to enjoy them, and am going to do some good in them, if I can."

Then in a louder tone he said: "Take me up into the tower, and place me by the window, where I can look out on the great blue sea covered with white sails; for I feel that my spirit is ready to float away like that into the great ocean of eternity."

* * * * *

And so the first day of the wind-flower's life passed away, filled with many little pleasures and surprises. When the peaceful twilight came, she hung her head in sleep, and quiet, pleasant dreams floated round her all night long.

CHAPTER II.

ANOTHER day of sunshine ; the grass was greener, and there were more flowers in the forest.

"I am getting along in life, and must have more dignity to-day," said the wind-flower ; but soon she saw so many pleasing things, the sunlight was so perfect, and the breeze blew so softly and caressingly, that she was nodding and smiling like the very youngest kind of a wind-flower.

There was a beautiful green bird that sang gayly on a neighboring twig, and he had a modest brown mate who was sitting on a nest with four speckled eggs in it. But the green bird sang to the wind-flower and talked to her until the little brown bird became quite jealous.

Then came red and golden and white

butterflies flitting by ; and in the sky were snowy clouds which drifted slowly about like enchanted boats, now and then hiding the sun and leaving the forest in shadow.

"This is the best day of all," said the wind-flower.

But after a while came a young woman, who sadly sat down close to the wind-flower. The spring had now no power to thrill her.

"On this day I was to have been a bride," she said, wearily. "But now my only joy, bitterer than the pain of others, is to place new blossoms each day on my lover's tomb. The dreary years stretch far into the future, and they may be many before I can seek the peace of the grave, the only peace I can hope for now."

The wind-flower trembled, as she said : "Surely, if your lover loved you, he would not have wished you to lead a miserable life on his account. It is possible to be happy without being a bride. I am a lonely wind-flower, and have never seen another. Yet the other flowers are kind

"ON THIS DAY I WAS TO HAVE BEEN A BRIDE."—Page 10.

to me, and every day has its history and its pleasures."

The young woman heard, and sat for a long time looking before her. Then she walked away and noticed that the sun was shining, the birds singing, and that it was springtime.

She did not forget her lover. Ever to her were sacred the memories of the days that were gone. The walks in the long summer evenings, the meetings and partings, the anticipations of that bright time —all these things would memory bring back many a time and oft. And yet she was not miserable. Each day had its history, some pleasure, and some kind act.

Did she live constant to her one lover till death came? If so, it was her affair, and not ours.

Or did she find another, and, as the years slipped by, hear by the winter fireside the merry voices of children?

If so, it was well. Was she to cast aside her life as of no value because it had been

hurt or broken? Does nature tell the crooked tree not to grow, or tell the broken bough not to produce leaves, flowers, or fruit? No, many a tall tree shows that it has been twisted by the storm, and many a broken branch shows greenest of them all. Perhaps, even, having known sorrow and adversity, she knew the better how to enjoy and appreciate what remained to her of life.

We know there are some worthy sentimentalists who will disapprove of all this. They admire a broken heart in the same way in which they admire a broken vase dug up from the ruins of Troy. They have artistic minds, and prefer dark shades here and there, wishing certain people to be miserable lest the harmony of the picture should be spoiled. But they should remember that the shades are easily found, and that the bright colors are those which have been wanting in human life.

CHAPTER III.

On the third day it rained. The wind-flower tucked down her head, but she was amused at the way some tiny raindrops, full of mischief, would jump up and sprinkle her in the face.

Then came a great grasshopper, who tried to shelter himself under a leaf of half his size, and made merry with the wind-flower.

But after that something wonderful happened. The rain made a rivulet, and presently there came swimming in it, where such a thing had never been seen before, a fish an inch long. Bravely he swam against the current until he came to a waterfall. He sprang to the top of it, but was hurled back again, being twisted around in a most ridiculous fashion. Then the wind-flower, the grasshopper, and the fish all laughed together.

About this time a woman clothed in black and followed by two children, a boy and a girl, came slowly along.

"There is no springtime for us, the widow and the orphans," she said. "Nothing henceforth but sorrow and privation."

"Be not so sure," said the wind-flower. "I see nothing to prevent you from looking about and enjoying the springtime, and to do so would be a good preparation for trouble, if you are going to have it. At least you have your children to look after, and it is scarcely well to cast a gloom over their spirits. Youth, with its pleasures, is gone for you; but the autumn ought to be one of the most pleasing times of the year."

Then the woman went away with her children, who, in after times, owed many a bright day to the wind-flower. In some way their mother ceased to speak gloomily or to look despondent. By opposing her troubles resolutely she partially overcame them, and recognizing that life must have

its cares, became reconciled to what remained. Strength came to her, and peace, and beauty of soul.

Did she continue a widow, looking only after the welfare of her children, as they grew into manhood and womanhood? If so, it was her affair, and not ours.

Or did she find another husband in the quiet autumn days of her life? If so, it was well, for nature has not only given to widows a disposition to sympathize with the unfortunate and to console the sorrowful, but sometimes also gives to them natures capable of being consoled.

CHAPTER IV.

ON the fourth day it still rained now and then, and was a little chilly. "This is bad," said the wind-flower. "I had hoped that the last day would be sunny; but we will see what can be made of it."

It was not long before an old man came strolling along in the rain. "My days are almost finished," he said; "all the best of them are gone, and what remain are only the dregs, not worth living. My children are all dead, and my little grandchild will be left alone and unprotected when I am gone."

"You are wrong," answered the wind-flower, quietly. "You have probably some years yet to live, ages to me, who had four days to live and am now on my last. I, too, am old. They said I was handsome once, but now you see I am wrinkled and faded."

"Pretty yet, pretty yet," chirped the green bird, and the little brown mate was vexed.

The wind-flower smiled at the interruption, and then continued: "Youth is over for you; but you can walk about and see the fair world, and you ought to have many pleasing memories, treasures for your old age. Do not repine because your life may be brief. I heard two owls talking last night; for," she added, with a half-sad smile, "I do not sleep as well now as in my younger days. The owls said that lasting things, such as the mountains, the ocean, and the eternal stars, seemed merely to bear patiently the burden of existence, and that it was only short-lived things, such as butterflies, birds, and flowers, that seemed to rejoice. Provide the best you can for your grandchild, and then do not worry. This seed-pod which I carry will be broken after my death, and the seeds scattered abroad. Whether they will perish or spring up into beautiful flowers next year I do not know. You

have seen your children and your grandchildren, while I can never hope to see a child of mine ; but yet I do not fret at a state of things which I cannot prevent. I do not know much, and do not like to put forward my opinions ; but now, in my old age, as I look back on my past life, with its varied experiences, it seems to me that it is best to be simple and true, that sweetness is better than bitterness, that light is better than darkness, that happiness is better than misery."

The wind-flower paused, quite out of breath ; for she had never made so much of a set speech before. The old man thanked her for what she had said, which pleased the wind-flower mightily, as none of the others had thought to offer any thanks.

Then the old man went back, and was changed so much that people spoke of him as "that good, kind old man, though somewhat queer."

One day, a young man saw him sitting by the roadside, while his little fair-haired granddaughter was throwing pebbles into

a brook. As he noticed the old man's white hair and threadbare coat, he pitied him. "Is there anything I can do to assist you?" inquired the youth.

"Nothing," replied the old man. "I have enough to supply my few wants. But I will tell you a secret. I am not poor, though people may think so. I am a rich old miser. It is true that I have but little gold or silver, but I have two large coffers. In one of them I keep the good deeds I have done, and in the other the happy hours and days I have known. I have not lived altogether as I might have done, and they are not as full as they should be; but, old and feeble as I am, I still add to them now and then. On rainy days, at quiet times, and at nights, when the wind howls and no one is looking, I get them out and gleefully count over my treasures. Try to live in such a way that when you are old you can be a miser too."

* * * * *

Toward the evening of the fourth day the sun came out. The raindrops on the

trees and grass shone like diamonds ; and in the east hung a great rainbow.

"It is as I wished it to be," said the wind-flower ; "and I am content."

As the twilight came, the flowers said to one another in low voices : "The wind-flower is going to die to-night." Then the tall, proud sweet-william bent down and kissed the little faded wind-flower very tenderly, while something shone in the eye of the violet—it may have been a raindrop, but we believe it was a tear—and the spring beauty hung her head sorrowfully.

Next day the bumble-bee, the grasshopper and the green bird looked for the wind-flower, but did not find her. Her life was gone ; but its effects linger yet. Perhaps in some future time, some bright being from some far-off sphere, cleaving the blue depths and hovering near this earth, may see in the warp of life a little golden thread, and, tracing it back through the maze of the years, may find that it was begun by a little wind-flower, dead in the wild wood long ago.

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